

FOUR PRINCIPLES FOR A FULFILLED LIFE



By Max Lucado

Introduction

Fulfilled. *What a word! Two simple syllables and yet so elusive for our frazzled and restless hearts. Who among us hasn't yearned for something even faintly resembling fulfillment in our frantic, demanding, "what-have-you-done-for-me-lately" world?*

Fulfilled is a great word—the only problem is finding it. Oh, we can crack open a dictionary and “find” is easily enough, right there between “fulcrum” and “fulgent” ...but the trick is moving beyond Webster's and finding it in the pages of our lives.

The truth is that a fulfilled life is well within the reach of anyone hungry enough to devour the four principles in this booklet. If you want fulfillment, if your heart cries out for deep satisfaction, then take a few unhurried moments to drink in the life-giving principles that follow. Your heart will thank you for it.

Chapter One

FIND JOY IN THE ORDINARY

We played every game we knew. We ran up and down the hall. We played “find me” behind the couch. We bounced the beach ball off each other’s heads. We wrestled, played tag, and danced. It was a big evening for Mom, Dad, and little Jenna. We were having so much fun that we ignored the bedtime hour and turned off the T.V. And if the storm hadn’t hit, who knows how late we would have played.

But then the storm hit. Rain pattered, then tapped, then slapped against the windows. The winds roared in off the Atlantic and gushed through the nearby mountains with such force that all the power went off. The adjacent valley acted as a funnel, hosing wind on the city.

We all went into the bedroom and lay on the bed. In the darkness we listened to the divine orchestra. Electricity danced in the sky like a conductor’s baton summoning the deep kettledrums of thunder.

I sensed it as we were lying on the bed. It blew over me mixed with the sweet fragrance of fresh rain. My wife was lying silently at my side. Jenna was using my stomach for her pillow. She, too, was quiet. Our second child, only a month from birth, rested within the womb of her mother. They must have sensed it, for no one spoke. It entered our presence as if introduced by God himself. And no one dared stir for fear it would leave prematurely.

What was it? An eternal instant.

An instant in time that had no time. A picture that froze in mid-frame, demanding to be savored. A minute that refused to die after sixty seconds. A moment that was lifted off the time line and amplified into a forever so all the angels could witness its majesty.

An eternal instant.

A moment that reminds you of the treasures surrounding you. Your home. Your peace of mind. Your health. A moment that tenderly rebukes you for spending so much time on temporal preoccupations such as savings accounts, houses, and punctuality. A moment that can bring a mist to the manliest of eyes and perspective to the darkest life.

Eternal instants have dotted history.

It was an eternal instant when the Creator smiled and said, “It is good.” It was a timeless moment when Abraham pleaded for mercy from the God of mercy, “But if there are just ten faithful.” It was a moment without time when Noah pushed open the rain-soaked hatch and breathed in the clean air. And it was a moment in the “fullness of time”

when a carpenter, some smelly shepherds, and an exhausted, young mother stood in silent awe at the sight of the infant in the manger.

Eternal instants. You've had them. We all have.

Sharing a porch swing on a summer evening with your grandchild.

Seeing *her* face in the glow of the candle.

Putting your arm into your husband's as you stroll through the golden leaves and breathe the brisk autumn air.

Listening to your six-year-old thank God for everything from goldfish to Grandma.

Such moments are necessary because they remind us that everything is okay. The King is still on the throne and life is still worth living. Eternal instants remind us that love is still the greatest possession and the future is nothing to fear.

The next time an instant in your life begins to be eternal, let it. Put your head back on the pillow and soak it in. Resist the urge to cut it short. Don't interrupt the silence or shatter the solemnity. You are, in a very special way, on holy ground.

Chapter Two

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Ahhh...an hour of contentment. A precious moment of peace. A few minutes of relaxation. Each of us has a setting in which contentment pays a visit.

Early in the morning while the coffee is hot and everyone is asleep.

Late at night as you kiss your six-year-old's sleepy eyes.

In a boat on a lake when memories of a life well lived are vivid.

In the arms of a spouse.

At Thanksgiving dinner or sitting near the Christmas tree.

An hour of contentment. An hour when deadlines are forgotten and strivings have ceased. An hour when what we have overshadows what we want. An hour when we realize that a lifetime of blood sweating and headhunting can't give us what the cross gave us in one day—a clean conscience and a new start.

But unfortunately, in our squirrel cages of schedules, contests, and side-glancing, hours like these are about as common as one-legged monkeys. In our world, contentment is a strange street vendor, roaming, looking for a home, but seldom finding an open door. This old salesman moves slowly from house to house, tapping windows, knocking on doors, offering his wares: an hour of peace, a smile of acceptance, a sigh of relief. But his goods are seldom taken. We are too busy to be content. (Which is crazy, since the reason we kill ourselves today is because we think it will make us content tomorrow.)

“Not now, thank you. I've too much to do,” we say. “Too many marks to be made, too many achievements to be achieved, too many dollars to be saved, too many promotions to be earned. And besides, if I'm content, someone might think I've lost my ambition.”

So the street vendor named Contentment moves on. When I asked him why so few welcomed him into their homes, his answer left me convicted. “I charge a high price, you know. My fee is steep. I ask people to trade in their schedules, frustrations, and anxieties. I demand that they put a torch to their fourteen-hour days and sleepless nights. You'd think I'd have more buyers.” He scratched his beard, then added pensively, “But people seem strangely proud of their ulcers and headaches.”

Can I say something a bit personal? I'd like to give a testimony. A live one. I'm here to tell you that I welcomed this bearded friend into my living room this morning.

It wasn't easy.

My list of things was, for the most part, undone. My responsibilities were just as burdensome as ever. Calls to be made. Letters to be written. Checkbooks to be balanced.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the rat race that made me slip into neutral. Just as I got my sleeves rolled up, just as the old engine was starting to purr, just as I was getting up a good head of steam, my infant daughter, Jenna, needed to be held. She had a stomachache. Mom was in the bath so it fell to Daddy to pick her up.

She's three weeks old today. At first I started trying to do things with one hand and hold her with the other. You're smiling. You've tried that too? Just when I realized that it was impossible, I also realized that it was not at all what I was wanting to do.

I sat down and held her tight little tummy against my chest. She began to relax. A big sigh escaped her lungs. Her whimpers became gurgles. She slid down my chest until her little ear was right on top of my heart. That's when her arms went limp and she fell asleep.

And that's when the street vendor knocked at my door.

Goodbye, schedule. See you later, routine. Come back tomorrow, deadlines...hello Contentment, come on in.

So here we sit, Contentment, my daughter, and I. Pen in hand, note pad on Jenna's back. She'll never remember this moment and I'll never forget it. The sweet fragrance of a moment captured fills the room. The taste of an opportunity seized sweetens my mouth. The sunlight of a lesson learned illuminates my understanding. This is one moment that didn't get away.

The tasks? They'll get done. The calls? They'll get made. The letters? They'll be written. And you know what? They'll get done with a smile.

I don't do this enough, but I'm going to do it more. In fact, I'm thinking of giving that street vendor a key to my door. "By the way, Contentment, what are you doing this afternoon?"

Chapter Three

ACCEPT FORGIVENESS

While Jesus was climbing up the hill of Calvary, Judas was climbing another hill—the hill of regret.

He walked it alone. Its trail was rock-strewn with shame and hurt. Its landscape was as barren as his soul. Thorns of remorse tore at his ankles and calves. The lips that had kissed a king were cracked with grief. And on his shoulder she bore a burden that bowed his back—his own failure.

Why Judas betrayed his master is really not important. Whether motivated by anger or greed, the end result was the same—regret.

A few years ago I visited the Supreme Court. As I sat in the visitors' chambers, I observed the splendor of the scene. The chief justice was flanked by his colleagues. Robed in honor, they were the apex of justice. They represented the efforts of countless minds through thousands of decades. Here was man's best effort to deal with his own failures.

How pointless it would be, I thought to myself, if I approached the bench and requested forgiveness for my mistakes. Forgiveness for talking back to my fifth grade teacher. Forgiveness for being disloyal to my friends. Forgiveness for pledging "I won't" on Sunday and saying "I will" on Monday. Forgiveness for the countless hours I have spent wandering in society's gutters.

It would be pointless because the judge could do nothing. Maybe a few days in jail to appease my guilt, but forgiveness? It wasn't his to give. Maybe that's why so many of us spend so many hours on the hill of regret. We haven't found a way to forgive ourselves.

So up the hill we trudge. Weary, wounded hearts wrestling with unresolved mistakes. Sighs of anxiety. Tears of frustration. Words of rationalization. Moans of doubt. For some the pain is on the surface. For other the hurt is submerged, buried in a rarely touched substrata of bad memories. Parents, lovers, professionals. Some trying to forget, others trying to remember, all trying to cope. We walk silently in single file with leg irons of guilt. Paul was the man who posed the question that is on all of our lips, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"¹

At the trail's end there are two trees.

¹ Romans 7:24

One is weathered and leafless. It is dead but still sturdy. Its bark is gone, leaving smooth wood bleached white by the years. Twigs and buds no longer sprout, only bare branches fork from the trunk. On the strongest of these branches is tied a hangman's noose. It was here that Judas dealt with his failure.

If only Judas had looked at the adjacent tree. It is also dead; its wood is also smooth. But there is no noose tied to its crossbeam. No more death on this tree. Once was enough. One death for all.

Those of us who have also betrayed Jesus know better than to be too hard on Judas for choosing the tree he did. To think that Jesus would really unburden our shoulders and unshackle our legs after all we've done to him is not easy to believe. In fact, it takes just as much faith to believe that Jesus can look past my betrayals as it does to believe that he rose from the dead. Both are just as miraculous.

What a pair, these two trees. Only a few feet from the tree of despair stands the tree of hope. Life so paradoxically close to death. Goodness within an arms reach of darkness. A hangman's noose and a life preserver swinging in the same shadow.

But here they stand.

One can't help but be a bit stunned by the inconceivability of it all. Why does Jesus stand on life's most barren hill and await me with outstretched, nail-pierced hands? A "crazy, holy grace" it has been called.² A type of grace that doesn't hold up to logic. But then I guess grace doesn't have to be logical. If it did, it wouldn't be grace.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey*, p. 52, Harper and Row, 1982.

Chapter Four

FINISH THE RACE

“It is finished.” John 19:30

Several years ago, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel enchanted us all with the song of a poor boy who went to New York on a dream and fell victim to the harsh life of the city. Penniless, with only strangers as friends, he spent his days “laying low, seeking out the poorer quarters where the ragged people go, looking for the places only they would know.”¹

It’s easy to picture this young lad, dirty face and worn clothes, looking for work and finding none. He trudges the sidewalks and battles the cold, and dreams of going somewhere “where the New York City winters aren’t bleeding me, leading me home.”

He entertains thoughts of quitting. Going home. Giving up—something he never thought he would do.

But just when he picks up the towel to throw it into the ring he encounters a boxer. Remember these words?

In the clearing stands a boxer and a fighter
by his trade, and he carries a reminder of
every blow that laid him down or cut him
till he cried out in his anger and his
shame—‘I am leaving, I am leaving!’ but
the fighter still remains.²

“The fighter still remains.” There is something magnetic in that phrase. It rings with a trueness.

Those who can remain like the boxer are a rare breed. I don’t necessarily mean win, I just mean remain. Hang in there. Finish. Stick to it until it is done. But unfortunately, very few of us do that. Our human tendency is to stop before we cross the finish line. Our inability to finish what we start is seen in the smallest of things:

A partly mowed lawn.

¹ “The Boxer” by Paul Simon, ©1968.

² Ibid.

A half-read book.
Letters begun but never completed.

An abandoned diet.

A car up on blocks.

Or, it shows up in life's most painful areas:

An abandoned child.

A cold faith.

A job hopper.

A wrecked marriage.

An unevangelized world.

Am I touching some painful sores? Any chance I'm addressing someone who is considering giving up? If I am, I want to encourage you to remain. I want to encourage you to remember Jesus' determination on the cross.

Jesus didn't quit. But don't think for one minute that he wasn't tempted to. Watch him wince as he hears his apostles backbite and quarrel. Look at him weep as he sits at Lazarus's tomb or hear him wail as he claws the ground of Gethsemane.

Did he ever want to quit? You bet.

That's why his words are so splendid.

"It is finished."

Stop and listen. Can you imagine the cry from the cross? The sky is dark. The other two victims are moaning. The jeering mouths are silent. Perhaps there is thunder. Perhaps there is weeping. Perhaps there is silence. Then Jesus draws in a deep breath, pushes his feet down on that Roman nail, and cries, "It is finished!"

What was finished?

The history-long plan of redeeming man was finished. The message of God to man was finished. The works done by Jesus as a man on earth were finished. The task of selecting and training ambassadors was finished. The song had been sung. The blood had been poured. The sacrifice had been made. The sting of death had been removed. It was over.

A cry of defeat? Hardly. Had his hands not been fastened down I dare say that a triumphant fist would have punched the dark sky. No, this is no cry of despair. It is a cry of completion. A cry of victory. A cry of fulfillment. Yes, even a cry of relief.

The fighter remained. And thank God that he did. Thank God that he endured.

Are you close to quitting? Please don't do it. Are you discouraged as a parent? Hang in there. Are you weary with doing good? Do just a little more. Are you pessimistic about your job? Roll up your sleeves and go at it again. No communication in your marriage? Give it one more shot. Can't resist temptation? Accept God's forgiveness and go one more round. Is your day framed with sorrow and disappointment? Are your tomorrows turning into nevers? Is hope a forgotten word?

Remember, a finisher is not one with no wounds or weariness. Quite to the contrary, he, like the boxer, is scarred and bloody. Mother Teresa is credited with saying, "God didn't call us to be successful, just faithful." The fighter, like our Master, is pierced and full of pain. He, like Paul, may even be bound and beaten. But he remains.

The Land of Promise, says Jesus, awaits those who endure³. It is not just for those who make the victory laps or drink champagne. No sir. The Land of Promise is for those who simply remain to the end.

Let's endure.

Listen to this chorus of verses designed to give us staying power:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers,
whenever you face trials of many kinds,
because you know that the testing of
your faith develops perseverance.⁴

Therefore lift your drooping hands and
strengthen your weak knees, and make
straight paths for your feet so that what
is lame may not be put out of joint but
rather be healed.⁵

Let us not become weary in doing good,
for at the proper time we will reap a
harvest if we do not give up.⁶

³ Matthew 10:22

⁴ James 1:2-3

⁵ Hebrews 12:12-13, RSV

⁶ Galatians 6:9

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.⁷

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.⁸

Thank you, Paul Simon. Thank you, apostle Paul. Thank you, apostle James. But most of all, thank you, Lord Jesus, for teaching us to remain, to endure, and in the end, to finish.

⁷ 2 Timothy 4:7-9

⁸ James 1:12

STUDY GUIDE

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Chapter One: Find Joy in the Ordinary

1. An eternal instant. A moment that reminds you of the treasures surrounding you. Your home. Your peace of mind. Your health.
 - A. Describe an “eternal instant” you experienced. What were the circumstances? What was the impact?
 - B. According to the following passages, what are some of the treasures we have on earth: Psalm 127:3-5; Psalm 128:1-6; Proverbs 31:10-12; Proverbs 19:14?
 - C. According to these examples, while Jesus was on earth, what did he do to stay focused on what was important: Matthew 14:22-23; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15-16; Luke 9:18?
 - D. In what way does our lifestyle work against “eternal instants”? What could we do to create more opportunities for these special moments? What could you do this week with your family—earthly or spiritual—that would remind you of what a blessing family is?
2. Eternal instants remind us that love is still the greatest possession and the future is nothing to fear.
 - A. What makes the future seem fearful? Do you expect the next ten years to be more difficult than the last ten? Do you look toward the turn of the century with anticipation or anxiety?
 - B. Read Psalm 103; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; and Hebrews 10:19-25. Who can face the future with confidence?
 - C. According to these passages, why can we feel secure about the future: Psalm 27:1-5, Psalm 121; Isaiah 54:10?

Chapter Two: Count Your Blessings

1. An hour of contentment. An hour when deadlines are forgotten and strivings have ceased. An hour when what we have overshadows what we want.
 - A. How would you define contentment? How is it different from happiness? What is necessary in order to be content?
 - B. Read Philippians 4:11-13 where Paul says he has found the secret of contentment in all circumstances. What was the secret? What kind of circumstances had Paul been in, according to 2 Corinthians 11:23-28?

- C. How rare is contentment? What words would best describe most of us on a normal: worried, hurried, busy, frustrated, tired, anxious, discouraged—or—peaceful, serene, content, happy, relaxed? What advice might Paul give us to increase our contentment?
2. “People seem strangely proud of their ulcers and headaches.”
- A. In what way is that a true statement for many people? What makes stress and pressure virtual hallmarks of success?
 - B. According to Luke 12:22-34, what should be the hallmarks of our lives in Christ? To what does Jesus compare us? What do we compare our lives to—a rat race, swimming with the sharks? What contrasts are evident?
 - C. What does your physical health tell you about your sense of peace and contentment? What does it say about your worry level? To what extent are you doctoring the symptoms instead of addressing the problem?

Chapter Three: Accept Forgiveness

- 1. While Jesus was climbing the hill of Calvary, Judas was climbing another hill—the hill of regret.
 - A. How do you view the character of Judas? How could he spend all that time with Jesus and then betray him? Why did he so quickly regret his decision?
 - B. Read the following accounts of Judas in John 12:4-6; Matthew 26:14-16; John 13:2, Matthew 26:17-30; and John 13:18-30. What insights do they give into Judas?
 - C. In what way are the traits of Judas common to all of us to one degree or another?
- 2. It takes just as much faith to believe that Jesus can look past my betrayals as it does to believe that he rose from the dead. Both are just as miraculous.
 - A. What is the very first thing that comes to mind when you think of Jesus’ miracles? Something in biblical times or something in the present? Do we tend to view any present-day occurrence as having the significance of Jesus’ miracles while he was on earth? Is Jesus an active or passive participant in your life?
 - B. What assurances do the following passages provide about God’s willingness to forgive even those who betrayed his son: Acts 2:22-47; James 4:7-10; 1 John 1:9? What blessings accompany forgiveness from God?
 - C. How would you counsel someone struggling to forgive himself for his sins? What verses would you direct him to?

Chapter Four: Finish the Race

1. Jesus didn't quit. But don't think for one minute that he wasn't tempted to.
 - A. Do you think Jesus seriously considered not dying on the cross? What do you think would have been the strongest temptation for not going through with it?
 - B. In the following passages, what could have tempted Jesus to give up: Mark 10:32-45; Mark 14:32-42; Mark 9:33-41?
 - C. What did Jesus do to gain the strength to continue? What are our greatest sources of strength when we are tempted to give up?
2. God didn't call us to be successful, he called us to be faithful.
 - A. Do you agree with this statement? How would you distinguish between being successful and being faithful? Can you be successful without being faithful? Can you be faithful without being successful? Explain.
 - B. What do the following passages teach about faithfulness: Matthew 24:12-13; Romans 2:6-7; Colossians 1:22-23; Hebrews 12:1-12? What will characterize the person who remains faithful? Why is the analogy of the runner an apt comparison for the Christian life?
 - C. To what extent do we value faithfulness in our society—faithfulness to our word, to our mates, to our responsibilities, to our God? To what extent does our culture value success? How can you model greater faithfulness for those around you?

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